



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Boxes of school supplies line a meeting room Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021, at Armand Larive Middle School in Hermiston. The Hermiston School District purchased the supplies with emergency relief funds from the CARES Act and will provide the items at not cost to all students in the district to alleviate the financial burden on families of purchasing school supplies.

Supplies:

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Stabilization Funds from the federal CARES act, became available for K-12 after the Department of Education approved their release on July 15.

Oregon, which has been granted about \$1.1 billion in education funding to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, can spend the ESSER funds to address a long list of issues.

According to the press release, "The approval of these plans enables states to receive vital, additional American Rescue Plan funds to quickly and safely reopen schools for full-time, in-person learning; meet students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs; and address disparities in access to educational opportunity that were exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic," said U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona.

Mooney said they calculated how much each district would receive by looking at the average number of students enrolled and placed restrictions on how they could spend the money. Hermiston School District has received a total of \$16.75 million in ESSER grants according to data compiled from the Oregon Department of Education.

"Because of how those funds are targeted and being able to provide opportunities for students, because of COVID, we were able to utilize those funds to provide the school supplies," Mooney said.

In prior years the school



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Boxes of colored pencils sit among school supplies Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021, at Armand Larive Middle School, Hermiston, in preparation for their distribution to students at the start of the school year. The Hermiston School District is providing the supplies for free to students in lieu of the usual requirement for parents to purchase supplies for use at school.

district would release a supply list and have parents purchase all necessary supplies. If they couldn't afford supplies, community groups and organizations would often donate supplies to those who didn't have access to them.

"I think it's fantastic that the school district is providing supplies," said Reagan Bass, an employee of Umatilla-Morrow County Head Start, an agency that provides services to families in the Hermiston School District and neighboring areas. "When you have six kids it adds up," she added.

The idea to provide school supplies started last year when COVID-19 hit, said Briana Cortaberría, Hermiston School District's communication officer and executive assistant.

Cortaberría said each class began to have its own supplies in response to safety measures

and to maintain the health and safety of students.

"It kind of came out of a progression of what we learned last year," Mooney said.

While the total cost of school supplies that Hermiston School District requested in 2019 ranges between \$25-\$50 if buying the cheapest items at Walmart, this number can quickly add up as the number of children in a family increases. This number also increases as school supplies, such as pencils and paper, run out throughout the school year, forcing parents to buy replacements.

This number does not include other common back-to-school shopping supplies, such as clothing and electronics, which Hermiston School District will not be providing.

This move to provide basic school supplies comes as

spending for back-to-school shopping continues to hit record highs, according to the National Retail Federation. A survey published by the NRF that involved 7,704 participants found that families with children grades K-12 plan to spend an average of nearly \$850 per family in 2021, up from an average of almost \$700 in 2019 — an increase of more than 21%.

"Coming off what's been a difficult year for all of our families, and I think we have a lot of families that have some financial uncertainty, we just felt like this was a good use of those funds to be able to provide that opportunity for all of our kids to have access to the same equity in their school supplies," Mooney said.

She said the district plans to reassess whether school supplies are a priority going forward.

Bar:

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Once they've put in the hours, the Bar applicants would graduate to becoming full-fledged attorneys.

The report recommends keeping the bar exam as an option, especially since it offers some portability for attorneys looking to practice out-of-state. Lawyers also still would need to complete a law program.

Opinions from local attorneys on these new ideas varied, but few were opposed to some sort of reform

The 'pressure test'

Intermountain Public Defenders recently looked to add another criminal defense attorney to its Pendleton-based practice. After advertising in the Oregon State Bar Bulletin, the group received zero applicants.

Justin Morton, an attorney with Intermountain Public

Defenders, said recruiting lawyers to work in public defense is never easy, especially in Eastern Oregon, where practicing law tends to be less lucrative than working in the Portland area. But Morton said removing barriers to becoming a lawyer could make it easier to expand the pool of legal professionals.

Morton said if a local resident wanted to become a lawyer today, they would need to move to the Willamette Valley, the location of the state's only three law schools, spend thousands of dollars on their education and take a test that doesn't necessarily prepare them for a career in law.

"What prepares you to be a lawyer is being a lawyer and doing it again and again," said Morton, who also is the president of the Sixth Judicial District Bar Association, a group that represents attorneys in Umatilla and Morrow counties.

Morton said the process

has made it difficult for low-income residents and people of color from joining the profession. According to a 2017 survey from the Oregon State Bar, less than 1% of lawyers in Eastern Oregon, an area that includes Central Oregon and the Columbia River Gorge, identify as Hispanic or Latino, although the data comes with the caveat that all the racial data is reported.

Pendleton attorney Blaine Clooten has been a vocal opponent of the proposed alternatives to the exam, going as far as to write Oregon Supreme Court Chief Justice Martha Walters.

In an interview, Clooten wrote that the Bar exam provided a critical "stress test" for prospective lawyers,

and giving law students a chance to bypass the exam could hurt clients and damage the profession's reputation.

"Just because you have more attorneys doesn't mean you have more competent attorneys," he said.

However, Clooten does think there's room for reform, especially the exorbitant cost of law school, which makes the process "classist" by shutting out impoverished students.

Despite all the debate, the Oregon State Bar hasn't turned the proposals into policy just yet. The Bar and the Supreme Court will continue to accept public comment on the proposals through Aug. 23. Comments can be made at the Bar website at <https://bit.ly/3itcuzw>.

Helix: 'Every little bit that we can do, we hope to take the strain off the hospital'

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Woolbright — each of whom are emergency medical technicians for East Umatilla Fire and Rescue — contracted COVID-19 in December after their daughter and her husband tested positive. Their son also contracted the virus, and he's still feeling the effects months later, including fatigue and lung problems, Woolbright said.

Woolbright was lucky to only fall ill for a few days. Regardless, he said, "It was not fun."

Emily Smith, chair of Helix Parks and Recreation, approached the church about Umatilla County's new Community Rewards Program, an effort to incentivize the shot. When the ZIP code encompassing the town reached 60% of residents vaccinated, groups that helped the county's vaccination efforts would split a \$10,000 reward, plus additional funds based on a community's population. Woolbright was immediately on board.

Helix's ZIP code was only five vaccinations away from meeting that benchmark. So, the parks department and the church teamed up to hold a night swim at the community pool on July 24 with live music and free vaccines. Nine people got the shots, Woolbright said, making the community the first winners of the program.

"I feel really proud of our community," said Smith, director of marketing, communications and foundation for CHI St. Anthony in Pendleton.

The ZIP code that encompasses the town now has the highest COVID-19 vaccination rate in Umatilla County with 63%, according to county data. Helix has a population of about 200, according to Oregon Blue Book, and accounts for 0.25% of Umatilla County's population.

The money for the program comes from the federal funding for areas to improve their vaccination rates. Smith said the parks department plans to use the funds to build a new public pool. Woolbright said he's unsure how the church will use the funds, but plans to give it back to the community.

"We call it benevolence," Woolbright said, "helping people out when they're in need."

Woolbright said he believes getting vaccinated is a personal decision. But with the community's immunization rates on the ups, he said he's glad to see elderly folks getting vaccinated and feeling safe while coming to church after holding services online for months.

To Woolbright, getting vaccinated is an important way for community

members to help keep case rates down. Umatilla County is experiencing one of the largest surges in COVID-19 cases in Oregon, with more than 400 reported cases this week, amounting to the highest case rates in the state.

"In our area, it's rampant right now," Woolbright said.

Working at the hospital in Pendleton, Smith has seen cases and hospitalizations spike in recent weeks. She said the wait time for the emergency room is now hours long due to the surge sweeping the county. That's why she thought an effort like the pool party was so important.

"Every little bit that we can do, we hope to take the strain off the hospital," Smith said. As COVID-19 cases rise across the Northwest, the hospital has had difficulties transferring patients in need of a higher level of care to other facilities.

All nonprofits and agencies can receive funds through the Community Rewards Program by showing they helped with the county's vaccination efforts. When their ZIP code reaches the 60% milestone, organizations receive \$10,000, plus additional funds based on population.

Only 15 county organizations have signed up for the rewards program so far, according to the county. The ZIP codes encompassing Pendleton and Hermiston are the next two closest areas to 60%, with 57% each. Both towns need more than 500 more people to get vaccinated for participating groups to receive funds.

The town of Meacham, at 55%, only needs to vaccinate six more people for participating organizations there to receive \$10,000.

Milton-Freewater's ZIP code is the furthest from the milestone, with 30% of residents vaccinated. The ZIP code would need 2,669 more people vaccinated to reach that goal. The next lowest percentage is Adams' ZIP code, at 31%. Umatilla also is a ways off, needing 1,410 vaccinations to get to 60%.

Smith said she hopes that, by reaching 60%, Helix serves as a beacon for other communities looking to curb the spread of the virus with more residents immunized.

She said, "I hope this encourages communities that this is attainable."

The groups now are planning to hold another event, with vaccines available at Helix Park from 2-5 p.m. on Aug. 21. The event will coincide with the country and folk music festival Wheatstock, which will happen that same day.

"Come get a shot," Woolbright said, "and a shot of whiskey."

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